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Protest and the Practice of Normal Life in Bulgaria

Elana Resnick

This article argues that Bulgaria's 2013–2014 protests were rooted in an imagined 'normal' life that protesters turned into political action, what I call the *politics of praxis*. The *politics of praxis* refers to the practice of aspirational everyday life as a form of political engagement. Protesters craft the type of world they deem 'normal' by performing and practising what they imagine an EU-era Bulgarian society should be. Everyday 'normalcy' is both (1) to what protesters aspire, and (2) the conditions of everyday protest life. It is only within the unordinary space of protest that utopian visions of EU-era 'normal' life can be realised.*

Key words: *protest, activism, social movements, Bulgaria, European Union.*

Straipsnyje teigiama, kad 2013–2014 m. Bulgarijoje vykę protestai buvo paremti įsivaizduojamu „normaliu“ gyvenimu, kurį protestuotojai pavertė politiniu veiksniu, autorės vadinamu praktikos politika (angl. *politics of praxis*). Šiuo atveju praktikos politika nurodo siektino kasdienio gyvenimo, kaip tam tikro politinio aktyvumo formos, praktiką. Protestuotojų manymu, jie „normalų“ pasaulį kuria gyvendami įsivaizduojamoje ES eros Bulgarijos visuomenėje. Kasdienis „normalumas“ yra (1) tai, ko protestuotojai siekia, ir (2) kasdienio gyvenimo protestuojant sąlygos. Utopines ES laikų „normalaus“ gyvenimo vizijas galima įgyvendinti tik neiprastoje protesto erdvėje.

Raktažodžiai: *protestas, aktyvizmas, socialiniai judėjimai, Bulgarija, Europos Sąjunga.*

Dr Elana Resnick, Department of Anthropology, University of California, Santa Barbara CA 93016-3210, USA, e-mail: eresnick@anth.ucsb.edu

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The Politics of Praxis

Protests often seem exceptional from afar. When newsworthy events occur, they become viable fodder for international attention. What circulates in media outlets are the eventful days, the moments when violence escalates, when clear boundaries between perpetrators and victims emerge, when the mundane veers into the exceptional. However, in practice, protests occur in and as part of daily life, especially when they span hundreds of days, as did the Bulgarian protests of 2013. This article focuses on the everyday life of protest, both as a method of inquiry and as the content of analysis. Participants' accounts of the 2013 Bulgarian protests use the 'everyday' as an analytical lens for understanding what happened in the aftermath of the protests, and as a framework for understanding the effectiveness of the protests themselves. As most protesters refer to 'the normal' and 'normal life' (*normalen zhivot*) in recounting both their reasons for protesting and their daily practice of protest they link normal life with the 'everyday,' a term that derives from analyses of praxis (see Lefebvre 1987; Bourdieu 1977; Schutz 1967; also Humphrey 2002). The everyday is thus a form of praxis of the ideological category of normal life.

If, in the words of Jessica Winegar, the 'iconic image' of the 2011 Egyptian uprising was a young man 'typically raising a fist, throwing a rock, or standing in front of tanks in some famous focal space in a major city' (Winegar 2012: 67), the corresponding image of Bulgaria's year of protest might be Plamen Goranov lighting himself on fire in a public square. Goranov's 2013 self-immolation marked the beginning of a series of political self-immolations that served as a central pivot for the Bulgarian protests. However, in 2015 and 2016, when I asked protesters what they remembered of the protests, years after their cessation, most recounted a different image: a group of young, educated professionals drinking coffee in front of the parliament on their way to work. In the lived experience of Bulgaria's 'year of protest', as it was commonly called, notions of 'normal life' and its connection to the 'everyday' are the central modes of recounting the salience of the protests.

The Bulgarian protests were, for the most part, notable for being both relatively peacefully quotidian and quite long in duration: 404 days in total, according to most protesters.¹ Masses gathered, police in riot gear were present, and there was the infamous July 2013 'night of the white bus', but the protests were not particularly eventful. In this article, I draw upon protest participant observation in 2013, as well as interviews and participant observation conducted in 2015

¹ Although the actual number of protest days is contested, 404 is the number used by most protesters and protest organisers with whom I engaged; 404 days of protest refers to the protests beginning on 14 June 2013 and ending on 23 July 2014. Many of the protesters with whom I interacted categorise the early (winter) 2013 protests as separate from their 404-day movement.

and 2016, to explore the experience and aftermath of Bulgaria's year of protest. For my interlocutors, the duration of protest-dependent 'normal life' provides a key analytical framework for recounting their experiences of protest in which longevity was key to the protests' effectiveness.²

The majority of the 404 days of protest could not be categorised as what Elizabeth Povinelli calls 'crises and catastrophes', the 'kinds of events that seem to demand, as if authored from outside human agency, an ethical response' (Povinelli 2011: 14). Crises 'inform the social science of suffering and thriving, the politics of assembly and dispersal, and the socially constituted senses of the extraordinary and everyday' (Povinelli 2011: 14; also Das 2007; Biehl 2005). Numbers, statistics in particular, become key in transforming what Povinelli calls 'nonperceptual quasi-events' into 'perceptual events, even catastrophes' (Povinelli 2011: 14). The lasting importance of the Bulgarian protests lies in the tension between the extraordinary and 'quasi-events' (Povinelli 2011). The physical and temporal bounds of protest altered daily urban life in Sofia: buses were rerouted, evening plans were redirected, and commuters changed their everyday routines (Iakimova 2013). But within the daily rhythms of the Bulgarian protests, what happened was ordinary. The protests were important, particularly for participants, not because of their eventfulness, but due to their duration and accumulation, of days, of ideas, of participating bodies.

I argue that the mundanity of the Bulgarian protests facilitated the conversion of an imagined normal life into everyday action. By performing and practising the everyday of what they imagine EU-era Bulgarian society to be, in the exceptional space of protest, Bulgarian protesters craft the type of world they deem normal. In forging the kinds of social spaces in which they want to live 'normally', protesters could be said to be engaging in a 'politics of becoming', albeit with a different temporality (Klumbyté 2014; Razsa, Kurnik 2012; also Biehl, Locke 2010). The temporality of the 'becoming' to which Neringa Klumbyté and Maple Razsa and Andrej Kurnik refer is rooted in future actualisation. For Klumbyté, the politics of becoming entails 'a future-oriented ongoing process of change instigated by citizens' hopes and desires emerging from their moral and affective worlds' (Klumbyté 2014: 474). In contrast, the Bulgarian protest politics of the everyday were not future-oriented, but firmly rooted in the present. For that reason, the Bulgarian protests veer away from a 'politics of becoming', and instead lay out possibilities for a different sort of politics, what I call the *politics of*

² Participant observation in 2013 included attending protests in both the winter and summer months. Since I did not know, at the time, that the protests would be a topic of inquiry, I did not conduct interviews until 2015 and 2016, during which time I met with former protesters, organisers, writers, politicians and journalists. In 2016, I also engaged in participant observation, in social and organising meetings, with diverse groups of protesters.

praxis. The *politics of praxis* is the practice of aspirational everyday life as a form of political engagement. Through the *politics of praxis*, protesters actively embody the kind of normal they desire and in so doing reconfigure the present as a space in which political change is possible. For that reason, in contrast to Lora Koycheva's claim that 'radical transformation will happen when Bulgarians collectively find the language to protest despite the everyday' (Koycheva 2016), I argue that the everyday becomes exactly the space in which – and means by which – political change happens.

By analysing practice-as-protest, I put into question the forms and forums in which protest takes place and is defined. Despite media emphases on Plamen Goranov's self-immolation, and the many self-immolations that followed during the winter of 2013, which served as inspiration for protesters, Bulgaria's year of protest had as its source something a bit harder to iconise: a new, lived mode of everyday life. Everydayness, what LeFebvre defines as encompassing both repetitions and the cycles of life and death, is always an ideological construct (see Lefebvre 1987; Ries 2002). Bulgarian protesters constructed an everyday sociality rooted in the socio-materiality of expectation. That is, they forged their sense of normal everyday life out of what they had come to expect from EU-era life in Bulgaria: communal outdoor coffees, the ability to buy and consume American food products, and open political conversation.

Temporality of the Everyday

During the protests, when I arranged to meet with friends in the centre of the city after work, we would typically meet on the busy Eagles' Bridge (Orlov Most) after buying beers at a nearby kiosk. We would sit on the bridge, recounting the day, before going somewhere for dinner. Other times we would march down Sofia's central golden brick road (Tsar Osvoboditel) until someone got hungry, and we would splinter off from the group, beers in hand, to get a slice of pizza. Later, we would meet up back on the bridge, where we would stay until midnight. Entire families would spread blankets on the concrete ground to have picnics with friends and other families, while their children played freely on the temporarily pedestrian (car-free) bridge. Often there were musical instruments. We would play bongos as we sang songs or talked. Nearly everyone had their cell phones in hand, in order to post real-time images and videos on Facebook. I would often run into old friends who I had not seen in months and we would sit together on the bridge, catching up on time spent apart.

Most protesters, who arrived before work to drink coffee and returned after work for a beer with friends, found themselves at the same place every morning and every evening. Many of those who protested during the summer

months of 2013 were employed professionals. They protested during their off-hours, despite the fact that they were often protesting when nobody was actually working inside the public administration buildings at which they directed their outrage. Government offices are typically only open from 9am until about 4pm, and therefore protesters and officials rarely occupied the same space at the same time.

I conducted the majority of my interviews with protesters in English, due to the protest participants' fluency and desire to be interviewed in the language in which this article is written. Years after the protests faded into memory or 'fizzled out' (Popova 2016), protesters framed the afterlife of protest in two ways: one, by recalling heroic images of men burning themselves in public; and the other, the focus of this piece, by recounting how their practice of protest-era everyday life defined and redefined an EU-era 'normalcy', which they had come to expect and to which they still aspire (cf. Greenberg 2011; see also Fehérváry 2002; Fehérváry 2009; Fehérváry 2013; Galbraith 2003). In the wake of EU accession, despite a fractured sense of what EU-era Bulgarian life should and could be, protesters consolidated disparate understandings of European normalcy into a rather cohesive set of ideals upon which they based their praxis.

Unlike many other left-leaning movements in the region, Bulgarian political activism did not explicitly '[shift] democracy to the terrain of daily life', as Razsa and Kurnik document in the Slovenian protests of 2011 (Razsa, Kurnik 2012). Daily life was important for the Bulgarian protests, but not in a direct one-to-one correlation with democracy. Instead, the Bulgarian protests established a new mode of daily life through the practice of protest-dependent normalcy. While many protesters referenced, in conversation, the need for new kinds of democratic participation and a reformed political system in Bulgaria, their retelling of the effectiveness of the protests veered away from the explicitly political to focus intently on daily life. This focus is not only one emerging in hindsight, but one that shaped the development of the protests at the time; the Bulgarian protests used everyday life as a way, in the words of one organiser, to show passers-by 'that you are having fun and expressing your opinion at the same time, and that it's not a scary thing'.³

During the summer of 2013, when Parliament was on vacation, protesters staged a makeshift beach in front of the Parliament building, and performed, in simulation, typical everyday Bulgarian Black Sea life. This included a kiddie pool with water, sand with beach chairs, a beach volleyball set-up where protesters played, and even people hawking corn and ice cream as though on the

³ Cited from an interview recorded in 2016.

shore selling to tourists. Peter,⁴ one of the long-term protest organisers, recalled that although the corn was not actually boiled, 'it was alright because we were doing a whole scene.' The performance was key to the protests' success, Peter explained. 'People who don't want to be aggressive, come for that [performance], because in the evening it's fun. So, they are having fun, they are not coming for conflict ... They have small children and they have to take care of them, so they come with them.' Peter's wife, Maria, interjected: 'Children, dogs, bikes ... you know that you are safe there and you can be calm.' Being calm, having fun, and doing 'normal' things were common tropes in the discussions I had with protesters. The mundanity of the protests was important as much for its appeal to those interested in 'fun' as for its agentive restructuring of everyday life.

A Short Chronology of the Protests

'I am sick of this fucking life!' 26-year-old Trayan Marechov exclaimed, in Bulgarian, before lighting himself on fire. The next day, on 18 February 2013, the photographer, environmentalist and activist demonstrator Plamen Goranov set himself on fire in front of a municipal building in his hometown of Varna, Bulgaria. Goranov had been protesting against TIM, a well-known Varna-based holding company, and, according to local knowledge and US embassy reports, a hub of organised crime. Witnesses claim that on the way to the hospital, Goranov revealed that he did not actually want to kill himself. Despite his misgivings, he died on 3 March 2013, Bulgaria's Day of Liberation, which celebrates Bulgaria's independence in 1878 from Ottoman rule. Goranov immediately became a symbolic figure for his contemporaries who saw his death as an echo of Jan Palach's self-immolation in 1969 at the end of the Prague Spring. In response to protests, the mayor of Varna resigned days later. Soon thereafter, a wave of protests shook the country, and Boiko Borisov, the prime minister of Bulgaria, resigned as well.

During the first wave of mass winter protests, citizens rallied together by focusing on high electricity bills. In January 2013, the protests escalated from the southwest Bulgarian city of Blagoevgrad to the rest of the country. By mid-February 2013, nearly 100,000 protesters took part in protests against high utility bills. Protesters called for the expulsion of three foreign-owned companies that controlled the electricity market. Controversies over electricity costs raged as protestors declared that nearly half of their bills were extraneous fees. Electricity company officials responded by explaining that overhead fees were higher in Bulgaria than in the rest of Europe due to the need to recoup funds lost to local electricity theft and unpaid bills.

⁴ All names have been anonymised with pseudonyms.

Following Borisov's resignation, an interim government was appointed in February and parliamentary elections were scheduled for May 2013. In the elections, the center-right European People's Party (GERB) won more votes and National Assembly seats than the other parties, but failed to win a majority. GERB entered into a coalition with the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP), the Movement for Rights and Freedom, and the far-right Ataka party. The coalition nominated Plamen Oresharski, a socialist technocrat, as prime minister. However, before he could form a government, a new wave of protests erupted due to Oresharski's appointment of Delyan Peevski as head of the anti-corruption unit DANS, the State Agency for National Security. Peevski, who headed one of the largest communication companies in Bulgaria (owning most of the television and print media outlets) and whose mother was the head of the state lottery, was notorious for his connections to corrupt and criminal elements throughout Bulgaria. Immediately, streets filled with thousands of protesters chanting 'resignation' (*ostavka*) and 'mafia' (*mafia*), as well as reinvigorations of 1990s protest-era anti-communist sentiments, such as 'red trash' (*cherveni bolkuci*) (Resnick 2016). By 14 June, the hashtag #DANSwithme⁵ became the symbol of the protests and an important tool for online and Facebook organising. Peevski resigned the next day.

Protests did not end after Peevski resigned. Instead, protesters continued, albeit in new formation, gathering in a semi-permanent tent camp in front of Parliament. They established pre-work morning coffee protests in front of Parliament (*na kafe pred parlamenta*) and after-work evening marches down the golden brick road (Tsar Osvoboditel) of central Sofia. This continued throughout the summer and culminated on 23 July 2013, the 'night of the white bus', when protesters, calling for the Oresharski government to resign, surrounded Parliament and barricaded members of parliament inside of the building for the night. By 4am, members of parliament attempted to leave the building on a government-provided white bus. This led to one of the few violent escalations between protesters and police officers. The bus, unable to move due to the protesters surrounding it, was forced to return the members of parliament to spend the night inside of the Parliament building until the early morning when police forcibly cleared a path so that they could exit.

Protests continued in small numbers during Parliament's August vacation and increased steadily in participation once Parliament resumed regular business in early September. On 8 October, the Constitutional Court allowed Peevski to reenter Parliament after failing to reach a decision about whether or not he

⁵The hashtag #DANSwithme became ubiquitous on social media, which was the main site for protest organising and communication. The hashtag is a play on words, because ДАНС, in Bulgarian, is the acronym of the State Agency for National Security, the country's secret service agency. However, when spoken aloud it sounds like the English 'dance with me.'

could remain a member of parliament. In response to Peevski's parliamentary reentry, on 23 October students at Sofia University began what would become a nearly three-month-long occupation of the university in support of the protesters (see below).

With the exception of what became known as the 'night of the white bus', Sofia's anti-government protests had few dramatic moments or crises. The moments that were violently dramatic do come up in participants' discussions of the protests. But, in 2016, when I asked protest participants about the ways in which the protests were most powerful or effective, most recalled a 'normal society' that they created through a new type of daily life routinised through the long duration of the protests. The Bulgarian protests were first and foremost a protest of praxis, through which participants actively engaged with the everyday promises of what normal EU-era life might feel like.

Practising the Everyday Normal

According to my interviews with protest participants, there was a small core of protesters who remained active for more than a full year, thereby enabling protesters to claim that the protests continuously spanned 404 days. According to them, the protests were sparked by Peevski's appointment on 14 June 2013. This singular event catalysed a movement (see Ganev 2014). According to Venelin Ganev, the protests consisted of a 'fairly large number of people' who realised that 'they are seeing elite misconduct *worse* than what they are used to' (Ganev 2014: 39, emphasis original). In Ganev's view, the protests were founded upon the 'suppressed anger of individuals who had no illusions about how damaged the system was', but until then had the 'option to do nothing about it' (Ganev 2014: 39). In contrast to this depiction of the protests, my interlocutors suggested that those protesting against Peevski were not a collective of cynics who had 'seen it all', but a group of individuals that had been involved in small-scale protests for decades and managed to garner widespread support in 2013 through the quotidian accessibility of their protest practices.

In nearly all of the interviews I conducted, my interlocutors remembered the public announcement of Peevski's appointment as an immediate call to action, which instantaneously changed everyday life. Over mint lemonades in the summer of 2016, Irina, an English-speaking consultant in her early 40s living in Sofia and an outspoken protester, explained the effect that Peevski's appointment had on her generation:

There was a huge emigration wave from around 1992 to 1994. Then, there was a second one, but smaller, when the [economic] crisis hit here ... in 1997. Now, after [what happened in] 2013, there was a third emigration wave, but it

was the worst emigration and I'll tell you why. Now the people who are leaving, they are my age. We have businesses here, families, but they pack up and leave. They can't stand it anymore. They are just leaving.

I asked her why so many people were leaving in 2013. She answered matter-of-factly: 'What happened in 2013 [Peevski's appointment]... it was like a punch in the face... for us, for all of us who were just striving to make it normal here. Simply normal. It was a punch in the face. The people in power, the people we don't see but who are pulling the strings, were bold enough to tell us, 'You know, fuck off!''

For Irina, there were two choices for those trying 'to make it normal here': protesting or emigrating. Irina remembered exactly what she was doing when she heard about Peevski's appointment. She was driving to her office near the Vitosha mountain suburbs on the outskirts of Sofia. She pulled over to yell inside her car: 'Are you nuts? Crazy idiots! This cannot be true!' Immediately, she knew she would go to the building of the Council of Ministers that night. When she arrived at her office, she told her team what was going on and they all sat around her computer to go on the Internet. She could not believe it was not some sort of joke. She called her friends and 'everyone was pissed off, I mean really pissed off. They wanted to throw stones and stuff like that. They were crazy pissed off ... and then I [went on] the Internet and Facebook was crazy.' Irina gathered her colleagues, messaged her friends on Facebook, and headed to the place she remembered well as the epicentre of the 1990s mass protests in Sofia, the golden brick road (Tsar Osvoboditel) in front of Parliament. From that day forward, Irina's life revolved around the protests. She continued working, but spent every free moment she had at the protests, even at the expense of her personal relationships, which suffered during the year of protest because she spent more time with fellow protesters than with her own family. While others I interviewed recalled changing their domestic lives to accommodate the protests, by having family picnics on the bridge (Orlov Most) in place of dinners typically held around a dining room table at home, Irina lived a new kind of protest-dependent daily life that at times proved incompatible with her former home life.

Irina explained that, along with her fellow protesters, she was just trying to live a 'normal life'. Despite the fact that by 2016, with Bulgaria already a member of the European Union (EU) for nearly a decade,⁶ many of the Bulgarian protesters with whom I met told me that although normalcy should be simple, their lives in Bulgaria were not normal. Many of those who protested also had expectations that with democracy – and subsequent EU accession – would come a 'normal' way of life. That so-called normal, however, is perhaps itself a relic of the early

⁶Bulgaria joined the European Union on 1 January 2007.

post-socialist period, in which a new 'normal' way of life was the goal of the 1990s, beginning with the public celebration of Todor Zhivkov's resignation in 1989. With the shift from state socialism to a democratic and market-based economy in Bulgaria came expectations that were never fulfilled and which still linger. Some 1990s protesters achieved a sense of normalcy by emigrating abroad, but others – the protesters with whom I spoke – could have emigrated but did not. They stayed to help build a normal life in Bulgaria.

In an interview with Martin, the man who co-organised what became known as the coffee protests in the summer of 2013, he explained that he could have lived abroad. He graduated from university abroad, and, like Irina, spoke fluent English. He was actually in Ukraine on a business trip when he heard the news of Peevski's appointment. He told his driver that they needed to drive the 20 hours back to Bulgaria immediately. He recalled his feelings at the time:

Everything is falling apart in my country ... the mafia finally claimed, officially, that it owns the country. This must be stopped. I love Bulgaria. I've had many opportunities to live abroad. I graduated [abroad]. I got my bachelor's degree when I was 19-years-old. I've had plenty of opportunities, but I decided to live here.

And so, upon learning of Peevski's appointment, he returned to Bulgaria, checked Facebook, and knew to head directly to the area in front of Parliament. He explained what he felt at first was a sense of camaraderie, knowing that the protesters were living separate lives but 'all feeling like the country's falling apart'. 'But,' he continued, 'each of us was doing our job, surviving, not just surviving, but doing well – with a lot more effort to have the same standard [of living] as in a normal country, but we were all doing well.' He explained that the protests were not inspired by 'some certain economic need ... or reason.' Martin made it clear that, in his view, the summer protests did not stem from impoverishment and did not have financial gain as their goal.⁷

Irina and Martin were working hard to live normally in what they termed a 'not-normal' country. When Peevski was appointed, it became clear that they would need to do more to live what they categorised as a normal life. Normal life needed to be fought for. In response to Peevski's appointment, the 'punch in the face', an attack on the normalcy that so many had tried to attain, young educated professionals knew that they needed to practise this normalcy as a protest.

Irina and Martin were both in their early 40s during the summer of 2013, and similar in age and experience to many protesters who led the summer protests.

⁷ Many of those deeply involved in the summer 2013 protests claimed that the early 2013 winter protests were not 'authentic', because they were either 'paid protests' based on political manipulation or protests rooted in financial desperation.

They were old enough to remember 1989 clearly. Irina remembers being in Greece in the fall of 1989, seeing a kiwi for the first time, thinking it was a strange-looking potato and then hearing from the Serbian hotel workers that the Bulgarian communist leader Todor Zhivkov had resigned. Martin recalls going out onto the streets of Sofia in 1989, although he does not remember it as a protest. 'It was just what everyone did.' However, they are also young enough to have been only teenagers at the time of 'the changes'. They remember what they were promised, what they expected, and what never came to fruition. Irina succinctly states what many other protesters echoed: 'The process that we started in 1989 is not over yet.'

Unlike the summer protests, the next wave of protests, the autumn 2013 student occupation of Sofia University, was both a reinvigoration of the 1990s transition period protests and a new action performed by those who were too young to remember 1989. The occupation of Sofia University has a long and important place in Bulgaria's protest history. In 1989, students took over Sofia University much in the way they did in 2013. In 2013, former 1989 protesters even trained students in how to occupy the same university that they had occupied decades before. With this as their protest lineage, college-age students, mostly in their late teens and early 20s, occupied Sofia University for nearly three months in the fall of 2013. The first month was a full occupation, reduced by November to the occupation of one university hall.

Despite its seeming extraordinariness, students recount the university with a sharp focus on the details of mundane everyday life. In an interview with Jordan, one of the main occupation leaders (although he, like many others, prefers horizontal, not vertical, ways of understanding protest organisation), he recounted the occupation as catalyzing a symbiotic relationship between occupiers and the public. Students organised in teams, fueled by the non-hierarchical logic of global Occupy movements,⁸ and divided into working groups each morning. There was, for example, a group handling public relations, another group that gave interviews on a television station that was live-streaming the occupation, another that posted on social media, and yet another that went outside each day to exchange words and materials with those on the other side of the gate that separated the university from the street. This included receiving donated supplies through the gate.

People would bring the students pizza, medicines and sleeping bags, and there were even elderly women who would supply the protesters with the most

⁸The global Occupy movement is a worldwide social movement focused on highlighting existing capitalist-infused social and economic inequalities, and using the tactics of taking over public spaces, and in that physical occupation promoting new forms of democratic engagement. The movement gained fame with the Occupy Wall Street movement in New York City in September 2011.

beloved of Bulgarian cheese pastries, homemade *banitza*. Yordan told me that the first time that he ever had Philadelphia Cream Cheese was while occupying the university. Someone had donated it to the students. Otherwise, in his regular life, he could not afford it.

Yordan was fascinated by the social limits of the university occupation. In his own conversations with participants, he was intrigued by one student who explained that she had a boyfriend inside the university and another on the outside. In practice, the worlds were separate. He found it compelling that the occupation forged a separate sphere of different social norms, personal connections, and rules.

However, what I find most interesting in Yordan's memories of the occupation is the cream cheese. Philadelphia Cream Cheese is both normal and not-normal. It exists both in the realm of the ideologically mundane and the aspirational. Yordan, born in the 1990s, grew up in a world in which the normalcy to which Martin and Irina refer was always anticipated but never materialised. Olga Shevchenko explains in her account of post-Perestroika Moscow, 'The imaginary normalcy with which Muscovites unfavorably contrasted their drab postsocialist existence was vaguely defined' (Shevchenko 2008: 64). The normal for which Shevchenko's interlocutors longed was not quite capitalist but not socialist either. Rather, 'The "normal" ... was a postsocialist, or rather a socialist-era, utopia of what life outside socialism *should* be – a utopia that resisted being pinned down to a specific exemplar' (Shevchenko 2008: 64). Similarly, Irina and Martin specifically refer to the normal as what EU-era Bulgaria is *not*. Like Shevchenko's interlocutors (Shevchenko 2008), the 'normal' resists being pinned down and emerges not from a post-socialist era of expectation but a post EU-accession period of disappointment (cf. Greenberg 2010; Greenberg 2014; Resnick 2016).⁹

The story of Bulgaria's year of protest is an EU-era one, notably because the agency of *not* emigrating becomes central to the protests, and because of the ubiquity of unaffordable items like Philadelphia Cream Cheese. The English-speaking educated elites who protest know that they could leave Bulgaria but they do not. Their choice to remain in Bulgaria and work harder than they would have to in a so-called normal country is at the heart of their political agency. Their idea of normalcy is based upon both romantic imaginings of what happens

⁹The trope of the 'normal' has become common in accounts of post-socialist changes. Krisztina Fehérváry writes about the role of post-socialist, new residential spaces that were considered to foster 'normal' kinds of life 'contained within but isolated from the continuing "not-normal" world' outside of them (Fehérváry 2013: 234; also Berdahl 1999; Galbraith 2003; Carroll 2016). This sense of not-normal life is considered to be a holdover from the not-normal socialist period. Fehérváry explains that in early post-socialist urban Hungary, the normal was considered to be rooted in the 'disentangling of material needs from social relationships' (Fehérváry 2013: 20).

in places like Germany, France and Belgium, but also from their lived experiences of what Bulgaria is not. The kind of normalcy to which Irina and Martin refer is similar to that which Krisztina Fehérváry's interlocutors in Hungary allude: idealistic and believed to exist somewhere (Fehérváry 2013). Irina and Martin know they could emigrate to live in West European countries, where they imagine life would be easier, more normal. But they stay in Bulgaria where they protest, where they fight for normal life by actually living it.

Unlike Irina and Martin, however, Yordan never invokes the post-socialist language of the normal. Perhaps this is because he is of a younger generation that did not come of age in the era of post-socialist expectations of normalcy. Rather, he explains that in 2013 Bulgaria he could not afford to buy Philadelphia Cream Cheese. In fact, he has never been able to afford it. Without an explicit ideology of the normal, Yordan notes that only while inside the university could he eat something that is advertised on billboards throughout the country as part of everyday Bulgarian life. Since Philadelphia Cream Cheese hit the Bulgarian market in the 2000s, it has become widely advertised throughout the country, on billboards and on television, and is more than double the price of similar cream cheese products that are local to Bulgaria (*krema sirene*). Only when occupying the university could Yordan take part in the 'normal' consumption patterns promised by Bulgaria's economic Europeanisation initiatives.

Irina, Martin and Yordan's accounts reframe protest in Bulgaria as both overtly attempting to change the everyday but also *as* the everyday. Bulgaria's protests thus enable a praxis-based articulation of EU-era desires, which rub up against a perceived not-normal status quo. When students gather in the university and for the first time have the opportunity to consume imported Philadelphia Cream Cheese, they embody a capitalist democracy that Europeanisation promised. Similarly, in the protests of 2013, when thousands would gather at the Eagles' Bridge (Orlov Most) after work, in the words of Yordan, 'drinking beer, not talking about the latest song by [the German band] Rammstein but about politics,' they practised what normal life could be. For more than one year, protesters experienced practice-as-protest as their most powerful means of political engagement.

A Coffee Society

One of the most mundane, routine, and important aspects of Bulgarian life is drinking coffee (see Neuburger 2012). Having a coffee in Sofia has for centuries, and still does, structure social life. In the post-EU-accession era, coffee meetings are a way to socialise within one's means and to exhibit class status. In downtown Sofia, one can find coffee for less than one leva (50 euro cents) and as much

as seven leva (3.50 euros). For Bulgarians, drinking coffee together punctuates the work day. The importance of the so-called coffee protests during the summer of 2013 can only be understood within this deeply Bulgarian framework of everyday coffee consumption.

Since the 2013 summer protests occurred around the confines of a typical European workday (9am to 5pm), coffee meetings in the morning, around 7am or 8am, and beer gatherings after 5pm, were vital to extending the protests to both ends of the work day. Martin explained that a client who runs several cafes in Sofia gave him the idea to start the coffee protests:

He was coming to the protests as a business owner, and said let's do something, because at the time we already had this camp, the protest camp in front of the Parliament, so he said OK you are now living in the square, let's do some coffee for the guys who are coming early for the protests.

In July, a group of protesters began, in Occupy fashion, to sleep on the pavement outside of Parliament. For Martin, it became important to connect the tent-sleeping protesters with those passing by on their way to work. Providing coffee for the tent-sleepers and the passers-by allowed such connections to occur during the shared experience of drinking a morning coffee together.

Moreover, Martin explained that the coffee protests were not just about providing free coffee, but also about establishing a way to quantify the number of protesters, which was important for the legitimacy of the protest:

We brought two coffee machines at the beginning and the idea was to count the people who were coming – because the police and media were saying it was only 15 to 20 people coming in the morning. So, we said OK, let's give free coffee and ask everyone to write their names on the paper cups so that afterwards we could collect the cups and count them to see how many people were there.

The coffee protest organisers assumed that everyone who came to the protests would drink a cup of coffee (which most did), so that Martin could quantify the protest participants based on used coffee cups, attempting to add statistical 'eventness' to a protest that remained in the realm of the 'quasi-event' (cf. Povinelli 2011).

At the beginning of the coffee protests, Martin and his friend, who wished to remain anonymous, paid for the coffee. Subsequently, they set up a donation box to collect donations from protesters. With this, the protesters effectively paid for their own coffee. Soon thereafter, Martin and his colleague rented two more machines, to accompany the two they borrowed from their private business offices, in order to provide coffee to all protesters. Martin remembers one person who arrived with a ten leva bill and wanted to donate five leva. However, well aware of the regulations for taking money in exchange for goods, which would require

a special permit, Martin insisted on never 'touching money'. Therefore, he told the person to just take the coffee and give his donation another day when he had change. Martin also recounted one time noticing a 100-leva bill in the donation box. By the late fall of 2013, when the coffee protests wound down, Martin and his colleague found that they had actually accumulated a surplus of 4,000 leva, which they then donated to a local church to help host a soup kitchen for the poor.

Many protesters with whom I met highlighted the importance of the coffee protests. Coffee is such a critical part of daily Bulgarian life that having a place to drink coffee in the morning, in a social atmosphere with other protesters, was vital to the routinisation of protest as a part of everyday life, as much as it was an inscription of a new norm of urban existence. In this version of the everyday, people meet and drink coffee together in a public square, instead of in front of their televisions or laptops. They engage in discussion and peaceful occupation of public space and they donate what they can for that experience. The European normal society which they desire, in the moment of the morning coffee, is exactly what they are a part of and in which they engage.

Conclusion

Through the *politics of praxis*, Bulgarian protesters enact a new kind of normal, in direct contrast to the not-normal of the everyday status quo. In doing so, they simultaneously critique what they consider 'not normal' in pre-protest everyday existence, and creatively forge an oasis of normalcy amidst their daily lives. The reconfiguration of 'the everyday' highlights post-EU-accession Bulgarian conceptions of normalcy that structure both the protests' goals and the forms they take. The normal is also what nearly all protesters with whom I met highlighted as what they could attain abroad if they emigrated. They choose, in effect, to remain in Bulgaria and, through protest, to routinise the normal life to which they aspire in everyday practice.

This praxis includes finding time to have a coffee with like-minded people, having the funds to buy and consume imported American products, and living in a country where corruption does not dictate all spheres of political life. Protesters' desire for a normal existence, 'a good life defined by modern, Western, and European forms of consumption and belonging' (Greenberg 2011: 89; see also Fehérváry 2013; Fehérváry 2002; Patico, Caldwell 2002; Verdery 1996), is not new. However, what is novel is taking this so-called normal into practice as protest.

In the early 1990s, ideas of the normal for post-socialist citizens were often located in a somewhat amorphous imagined reality of Western Europe; but in the early 2000s, as many formerly socialist countries moved toward EU integration,

normalcy shifted away from post-socialist expectations and has become tied to EU-era ideologies and rhetoric of Europeanisation. For example, depictions of the normal among my interlocutors were rooted in a utopian vision of economic prosperity, equitable purchasing power, and intellectual communality, often associated with a sense of cosmopolitan Europeanness, which still eluded them, despite Bulgaria's official EU member status. The Europe of which many Bulgarians imagined that they would become a part was one in which people drank coffee and discussed politics with like-minded friends, could afford imported cream cheese, and had the free time to do so. In the wake of EU accession, they had anticipated that partaking in 'normal' modes of consumption, sociability, leisure time and connections to a wider European community would structure life in Bulgaria (see Klumbyte 2011; Borneman, Fowler 1997 for similar ideas in other locales). But, this was not what resulted from Bulgaria's European Union accession in 2007.¹⁰ Rather, this imagined European everyday normal only exists in Bulgaria within the particularly extraordinary space of protest.

Protest sentiment and conceptions of the normal transformed as the winter 2013 protests morphed into the summer protests, and then the autumn 2013 student occupation of Sofia University. In the early 2013 winter protests, protesters forged a vision of a normal Bulgaria in which heating prices did not exceed incomes and pensions, and everyone could afford heating in the winter. Meeting citizens' basic needs was 'the normal' for which protesters fought. However, in the summer protests, 'the normal' was redefined through practices of everyday life. Understandings of normal shifted from fair heating prices and came to stand for transparency and a lack of corruption linked to Bulgaria's presumed Europeanness. Protesters put into practice this notion of a normal Europe, as fantastical and idealised as it was, through the construction of so-called normal spaces in which protesters could participate every day.

Janet Roitman begins *Anti-Crisis* with an epitaph from Martin Luther King Jr.'s speech 'Normalcy, Never Again' in order to think through crisis, not by asking what crisis is, but by questioning what it does (Roitman 2013). In line with Roitman's approach, I examine Bulgarian articulations and understandings of the 'normal' in terms of what the concept *does* for protesters.

The 'normal' functions as both a form of everyday life and a kind of expectation, a notation on the present as a way to connote that to which people can and should become accustomed. Normal acts like a deictic node, used always in relation to the not-normal. Like the deictic 'here' and 'there', the normal is

¹⁰In EU-era Bulgaria, the 'normal' has become fractionalised. The process of becoming part of the European Union, in the wake of 2007 EU accession, has manifested in widely differing expectations of what should be 'normal' in Bulgarian life (Resnick 2016).

used discursively in relation to a relative point of origin; in this case, the always-shifting not-normal. This changes over time from having electricity and heat in the winter to being able to afford imported American consumables in the summer. Practices of the everyday in combination with articulations of the normal help illuminate how people want to live their lives, not in exceptional terms, but what they want to be able to take for granted.¹¹ Everyday life functioned, during the protests, as a *politics of praxis* that eludes the boundaries of traditional forms of political engagement with which most protesters have already become disillusioned.

Protest Aftermaths

‘What do you miss most about the protests?’ I asked Irina. ‘Well, now there’s no place to go after 6:30pm. That has been the hardest change.’ Irina refers to what happened when the mass daily downtown protests stopped in late 2013 and everyday life shifted dramatically. Her fellow protesters, who became like a protest family, were no longer people she could expect to see each day. The sociality to which she, like many others, had become accustomed, and on which she had come to depend, no longer existed; she could no longer just show up at the Eagles’ Bridge (Orlov Most) to drink beer with like-minded people. The everyday practices of normalcy and democratic desire, a coffee-and-beer-fuelled normal society, had dissipated. This devolvement highlights the shortcomings of a protest based in everyday life. When protests rooted in everyday practice end, what remains? In the aftermath of protest, the legacy of Goranov’s self-immolation lives on, and he has, in fact, become an archetypical kind of martyr for the possibility of a normal Bulgaria. However, in the wake of Bulgaria’s year of protest, what lingers is amorphous and uncertain, because what existed was so experiential and quotidian.

When both the mode and means of protest is lived experience, what happens when everyday life returns to a state of not-normal? Protesters in the aftermath of Bulgaria’s year of protest understand success to be when the everyday and their ideals of normal life convene. Consequently, the end of protest-era everyday life also shifts practices and ideals of normalcy, leaving protesters to wonder not only what to do after 6:30pm each evening, but also where and when a normal Bulgaria might exist outside of the exceptional space of protest.

¹¹ In Bulgaria, the notion of everyday routine is not, like the Russian *byt*, commonly discussed in terms of its burden (cf. Pesmen 2000: 46). The ‘everyday’ in Bulgaria, encapsulated by the notion of normal life (*normal zhivot*), fits more in line with Michael Gardiner’s work on the everyday, in which ‘everyday activities always express transcendental elements of the imaginary and the utopian’ (as cited in Ries 2002: 739). In this sense, the everyday with which protesters enact their notions of normalcy is not what happens ‘every day’, but what they imagine *should be* quotidian and mundane.

I end with a discussion of what happens to critical protest sites in the post-protest context of everyday life. Bulgarian scholars have written about the impact of the protests on urban street traffic and the prominence of different public spaces during the protest era (Iakimova 2013). Just as famous Sofia monuments, which were once backdrops for everyday city life, had taken on new significance as important meeting points during the protests, they once again retreat to the background of everyday existence after the protests' cessation.

The Eagles' Bridge (Orlov Most), the locale where protesters gathered each evening, in the wake of protest is just as it was before, a main urban thoroughfare. Cars drive atop the bridge despite protesters' memories of sitting on the concrete, beers and bongos in hand. The golden brick road, Tsar Osvoboditel, in front of Parliament, is yet again a site where tourists gather to take photographs before returning to their rooms at the Radisson Hotel located directly behind it. This is not to say that protest does not alter society, but that there are limits to the afterlife of praxis politics. The results of the *politics of praxis* are hard to capture after the fact, especially when what remains is primarily in the memories of the everyday normal that took shape, accumulated, and endured throughout 404 days of protest.

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Protestas ir normalaus gyvenimo praktika Bulgarijoje

Elana Resnick

Santrauka

Remiantis protesto dalyvių stebėjimu 2013 m. ir apklausomis bei dalyvių stebėjimais, atliktais 2015 ir 2016 m., straipsnyje teigiama, kad 2013–2014 m. Bulgarijos protestai buvo paremti įsivaizduojamu „normaliu“ gyvenimu, kurį protestuotojai pavertė politiniu veiksmu, mano įvardytu kaip praktikos politika. Pagrindinis dėmesys sutelkiamas į kasdienį gyvenimą – ir kaip tyrimo priemonę, ir kaip analizės turinį – protesto metu.

Aš tiriu, kaip, praktikuodami kasdienybę, kurioje, Bulgarijos protestuotojų nuomone, turėtų gyventi šalies visuomenė ES eroje, jie susikuria „normalų“ pasaulį. Tačiau utopinės vizijos, koks turėtų būti normalus gyvenimas ES, kurio bulgarai taip trokšta, gali būti įgyvendintos tik neįprastomis sąlygomis – pro-

testuojant. Bulgarijos protestų dalyviai konstruoja kasdienį bendruomeniškumą, pagrįstą socialiniais materialiais lūkesčiais. Tai yra jie sukuria jausmą to normalaus kasdienio gyvenimo, kurio tikisi gyvendami ES su lauko kavinėmis, amerikietiškais maisto produktais bei atvirais politiniais pašnekesiais.

Straipsnis prasideda nuo pagrindinio argumento, išdėstyto skyriuje „Praktikos politika“. Tema analizuojama skyriuje „Kasdienybės laikinumas“. Skyriuje „Trumpa protestų chronologija“ apžvelgiami svarbiausi Bulgarijoje vykę protestų įvykiai. Vėliau klausiama, ką reiškia, kai protestuotojai įsitraukia į „kasdienio normalumo praktiką“. Šiame skyriuje plėtojama mano analitinė prieiga – atskleidžiama, kad „kasdienis normalumas“ yra (1) protestuotojų siekis ir (2) kasdienio gyvenimo protestuojant sąlygos. Tai savo ruožtu pakeičia pačią „protesto“ kategoriją. Šiame skyriuje gilinamasi į trečiąją protestų šalyje bangą – į studentų surengtą Sofijos universiteto „okupaciją“.

Tik „okupacijos“ metu protesto dalyviai pagaliau galėjo valgyti tokius produktus, kaip amerikietiškas tepamasis sūris „Philadelphia Cream Cheese“, ir tapti „normaliais“ vartotojais, būtent išmėginti tai, ką Bulgarijoje žadėjo ekonominės ES iniciatyvos, kurios kitomis sąlygomis būtų pernelyg brangios. Etnografinės detalės atskleidžia protestuotojų mintis apie bulgarų gyvenimą ES jiems pasiliekant šalyje, kai daugybė jų išsilavinusių draugų ir kolegų dėl „normalaus“ gyvenimo renkasi emigruoti į užsienį, daugiausia Vakarų Europą.

Po to straipsnyje diskutuojama apie tai, kas Bulgarijoje tapo žinoma kaip „kavos protestai“ „kavos visuomenėje“. „Kavos protestų“ metu žmonės susirinkdavo prieš darbą, kad galėtų kartu išgerti rytinės kavos „normalioje“, nuo protestų priklausomoje erdvėje. Tai buvo ypač reikšminga, nes kavos gėrimas yra labai svarbus Bulgarijos socialinio gyvenimo bruožas. Tuo pačiu metu kavos protestai leido organizatoriams suskaičiavus išgertų puodelių kiekį nurodyti protestuotojų skaičių ir įrodyti protestų teisėtumą platesnei auditorijai. Savo teorines išvalgas išdėsčiusi skyriuje „Išvados“, išryškinau, kaip protesto dalyviai „normalumą“ sieja su „kasdienybe“ ir kaip tai tampa pagrindu protestuoti remiantis „normalumo“ kasdieniame gyvenime praktika.

Straipsnis baigiamas skyriumi „Protesto rezultatai“, kuriame parodoma, kas atsitinka, kai praktika paremtas protestas baigiasi. Kas atsitinka, kai kasdienis gyvenimas sugrįžta į „nenormalią“ būseną, patyrus protestą ir kaip būdą, ir kaip priemonę. Po Bulgarijos protestų jų dalyviams sėkmė reiškia tai, kad kasdienybė ir jų normalaus gyvenimo idealai sutampa. Dėl šios priežasties protesto laikų normalus kasdienis gyvenimas pakeičia normalumo praktiką ir idealus, protestuotojus verčiant savęs klausti ne tik, ką reikės veikti kiekvieną vakarą, bet ir, jau palikus protesto erdvę, kada ir kur egzistuoja „normali“ Bulgarija.

Straipsnis baigiamas diskusija, kas nutinka kritinėms protesto vietoms kasdienio gyvenimo kontekste pasibaigus protestams. Dauguma sugrįžta į prieš protestus egzistavusią būseną. Tai nereiškia, kad protestai nekeičia visuomenės, tai rodo, kad politikos praktika yra ribota. Sunku įvardyti politikos praktikos rezultatus jau praėjus įvykiams, ypač kai viskas, kas lieka, tėra kasdienio „normalumo“ prisiminimai, kuriuos protestuotojai susikūrė, sukaupė ir patyrė per vienerius Bulgarijos protesto metus.

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